

No Child Left Behind? To Whom Are We Accountable?

By Stergios Botzakis

Everybody warned me about Larry. He was trouble; he was stubborn; he was a pain. The first time we met, everything went fine; the second time we met, he curled up into a ball and zipped his jacket over his head, refusing to speak to me or anyone else. As a teacher working for a private, nationally franchised tutoring company, I had seen lots of children like him. He was a reluctant reader working on the pre-primer level. He looked like a typical first grader, little and skinny, and I imagined he was being frustrated seeing all of his classmates engaged in reading while he floundered, not knowing his alphabet, let alone the sounds those symbols represented. I was right about his frustration, but Larry was in fifth grade, not first. He was tested and labeled a student in need of special education services; he was getting the majority of his education in a mainstream classroom with occasional

assistance from a teacher's aide. Unfortunately, she was often called out of class to be either in meetings for other special education students or in other classrooms as a substitute.

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Larry obviously had problems. He was lost in the educational process, a student functioning on a pre-school level in fifth grade. His clothes were hand-me-downs; he had chronic cold symptoms; he was often hungry, and his diminutive size suggested he was malnourished. I wondered how his parents had the

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money to pay forty to fifty dollars an hour for tutoring services but were unable to meet his basic needs. The answer, I found, was that they did not pay for his tutoring. Larry received services through a compensatory awards system. He was being tutored because his school was found to be neglecting his special education support services, and it was being forced by the city school district to compensate for this by providing him supplemental support. The amount of tutoring he was to receive was determined by calculating how many hours of special education services he had missed throughout the school year. Larry, it was determined, would receive 120 hours of tutoring services; he was at the center for three months. He was given three months to make up for six lost years.

Neil Postman, in “The Politics of Reading,” poses a question for teachers to examine themselves before considering what techniques of teaching to use: “Whose side am I on?” (1970). My answer for that last question is, always, on the side of the children, especially ones like Larry. I think of literacy as an avenue for personal improvement, whether it be used to gain knowledge, learn a skill, or be entertained, and I feel that the final aim of education is to prepare the younger generations to find their way and take their place in the world. With all of its language about reaching “100% proficiency for all students in twelve years” as an “ambitious, but achievable” goal, the current federal administration seems to also be on the side of the children in its No Child Left Behind Act (Boehner, 2001), but further investigation reveals that many of the practices mentioned in the act may cause more harm than good.

The key component in this act is establishing an “accountable” education system (United States Department of Education, 2002). This involves each state creating standards of knowledge for each grade level and to test student progress according to that standard every year, starting in the 2005-2006 school year, in grades 3 through 8. The purpose of this is to examine the academic progress of students and the performance of schools and their districts. If the district or school continually fails to show progress, they are then held accountable for that and have to suffer consequences. This, of course, is not couched in such terms, but rather in a manner of parental choice. If a school is shown to fail for two years in a row, based on its published testing data, the parent is allowed to move a student into a school that has shown progress, with the transportation expenses being charged to the school that failed. On top of that payment, the school loses part of its population and the accompanying funds that are received to teach those students. Schools that have difficulties attaining standards tend to be underfunded as it is. In effect, being accountable means being at fault, and the government is setting up scapegoats to take the blame for failure while placing questionable measures to correct these school failures.

One of the other “corrective” measures for a failing school is to allocate five percent of its Title I funds for before- or after-school tutoring either at the institution or at a district-approved private facility, such as the one Larry attended (“The New

ESEA," 2002). From what I saw, this was a fairly common practice in Baltimore already. Most of the children who came for tutoring were the compensatory awards cases, and many of them were in similar situations like Larry's; they were years behind their peers educationally. While at the center some of the students were oppositional, some resigned to their fate, but they shared one thing in common: they were only there for a few weeks. Larry had one of the longer allocations of time. Many of the students had just a couple of weeks to make up for years of neglect and confusion. By the letter of the law, these children were receiving services and outside support to aid in their education, and the school was making good on its accountability by paying for those tutoring sessions. Without the consistency of a long-term course of action, however, the students were not being given the chance to really grow and succeed. Being accountable here means that the school foots the bill for additional services, ones which do not last long enough to benefit the child.

Accountability was not a word I heard much while I was in college preparing to become a teacher, but it was prominent in the professional development I received as a reading teacher in Baltimore, Maryland. We were to include specific jargon in our lesson plans to show that we were working on certain areas; we were told that we would be monitored to make sure we were teaching according to the standards set by the school district and that we would be graded by those standards when we were formally observed twice a year. The result of this strict adherence was not that teachers always adjusted their methods to these standards; instead I saw they went about their business as usual.

The only difference I found was that they included specific, district-mandated special education accommodations in their notes along with a buzz word or two that the district suggested we use in forming our lesson objectives. As long as accommodations were written down (not necessarily practiced) and as long as objectives were included (but not always reached), a teacher had fulfilled the requirements to be rated proficient. "Just give them what they want," was a common refrain from the experienced teachers in the building, who added, "Then they'll leave you alone." And twice a year, they would take great pains on those scheduled days to prepare a lesson that took into account several of the district's suggested "best practices," making sure to incorporate some type of technology to enhance the lesson.

These semiannual dog and pony shows were not often typical of the kind of instruction that went on, but it was the basis of measuring teaching effectiveness. Because the standards were known and published did not necessarily mean they were carried out; teachers acted like wily students and gave their superiors exactly what they wanted to see on certain occasions. Outside of two days of the school year, they just did what they were used to doing, and children like Larry were ignored and passed along.

To go along with this accountability there was lots of testing, of course, with the big ones that "counted" happening in April. To prepare for this, there were grade level tests that occurred monthly. This was to prepare students the testing format;

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they were literally being taught to the test. This testing would take up most of the morning and would affect the normal school schedule for the few days that week the battery took place. The principal made a special point to remind teachers to be present those days to ensure a smooth testing environment. Regardless of this request, certain teachers who disliked administering the test were consistently absent, so the students' routines were additionally affected because they often had to have substitute teachers. During this testing, a "functional shutdown" was in place, meaning that students, even those not engaged in testing, were not to leave their classrooms for any reason save emergencies, so as to not disturb the ones testing. Signs were posted which read "Do Not Disturb! Testing in Progress." (One teacher, seeing the hypocrisy in this, made his own sign which read, "Do Not Disturb! Learning in Progress.")

During April when the main tests which were to be used to judge the school's performance took place, it was taken even further. Special education students were accommodated by one or two teachers' aides who were not called out of the session for any reason. The students taking the test were treated to breakfast every day, given snacks throughout the day, and offered activities instead of instruction in the afternoon. They were rewarded for merely taking the test because they had the school's ratings in their hands. This practice was not localized in one school; it happened all over the district. When so much emphasis is placed on testing, the result is that it overshadows everything else, and the focus of education is lost. If this system of testing which accompanies Maryland's accountability system at all mirrors that of the No Child Left Behind Act, we might be in store for some great changes. Children wouldn't so much be taught to learn as they would be taught to pass a test. We would not be called teachers anymore, but rather testers.

Instead of focusing on testing so much, I agree with Alfie Kohn that there be a scaling back to a "checking in" type examination, such as the NAEP, done once in elementary school, once in middle school, and once in high school (1999). Having an invasive, continuous stream of assessment distracts teachers and students from what should be going on in schools. But the scheduling of testing is outside of a teacher's general control, so I turn to what I can affect as a teacher and the kinds of practices I engaged in with my students. I am not going to prescribe specific activities or talk about skills that should be taught, but rather a general discussion of what the ends of education should be and how we can work to reach them.

I felt best about my own teaching when I was being a "passionate teacher," one who strived to get students to engage in discussions and activities that excited them (Fried, 2001). Usually, these activities were ones "giving students a chance to *do*" (Kohn, 1999, p. 143, italics his). When the class, myself included, engaged in an inquiry based discussion of text where they were invited to share and explain their views, we became animated; we shared our experiences; we learned from each other. When students worked together in small groups on learning projects, as peer editors, or in some other capacity, they embraced the opportunity to be "experts,"

thrilled to see what they had to say was being valued. Areas where students needed help were addressed at a local level; individual learning needs were met without the need to engage in broad-stroke skills instruction.

This process was rough at first, but once we established our expectations for the class, my students and I were able to develop a positive learning environment where we felt comfortable in sharing our views. I never knew the direction that a conversation was going to turn, and while sometimes that was scary, overall it was great. Students weren't just fishing for the right answers to feed me; I wasn't comparing their responses to what was in "the back of the book," and I was not reduced to listening to the same responses time and again. We got the opportunity to really listen to each other in an open forum. Administrators who observed me were at first skeptical of what went on in class, but once they began seeing the student work being produced, they came to see that there was some value to what we were doing in the classroom. We may have been taking part in different kinds of education, but we were still able to show them "hard results" in terms of learning, and I'd like to think that my students' learning went beyond just meeting learning outcomes. My students did as well as their peers on standardized measures, but I always was reminding them that all this testing was not the end-all, be-all of their existence, that these tests were not as important to their lives as the administration was telling them it was. But I also informed them that they would need to know how to test, because the reality is that standardized tests are used as gatekeepers for higher education.

I have thought that one of the main aims of education is to assist students develop "habits of mind" (Meier, 1995) in order to assist them in their lives. It seems especially relevant now for students to be vigilant and critical about the world in which they are situated. There is a steady stream of information, on television, in print, on the radio, online, and it is essential that people be able to filter this stream and make some sense of it. They also should recognize that this information is not neutral, that often there are ulterior motives behind whatever information they are receiving. This is not merely prescriptive education where you can put forth a formula to explain everything; critical education should be based on the particular context of the students and teacher and should develop out of their own thinking. Good educational practices require the recognition that "we cannot treat any two human beings identically" (Meier, 1995, p. 48). They will perceive things and act differently because they exist in separate contexts.

The point of education is to "create environments where all children can experience the power of their own ideas" (Meier, 1995, p. 4). Practicing this type of pedagogy involves shaking up the notion of what school should be like. This kind of teaching is not characterized by having students sitting quietly at their desks, attending to the lecture while taking notes, what Kohn refers to as the "Listerine theory of education," unpleasant but necessary (1999, p. 2). Teaching "habits of mind" requires children getting up, moving, and talking; it necessitates activity. Such classrooms can seem chaotic. This frightens some people who are used to

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seeing what Freire calls the “banking” model of education where teachers deposit the knowledge into pupils’ minds (1970), and it definitely takes some “guts” for a teacher to release some of the control of her or his classroom.

This type of education is also “messy.” There are no specific sub-skills to reference, no specific content to teach; there is nothing in particular that must be “covered.” It is difficult to develop a set curriculum for it, let alone one authoritative way of assessing learning. There are ways to assess such learning, and they are called “performance assessments,” and they include such things as portfolios (Kohn, 1999, p. 192). A portfolio contains a number of work samples from a student, often self-selected ones. There are examples of writing, projects, and other useful information from throughout the school year. Portfolios offer much information about individual students and their accomplishments. However it is more difficult and time-consuming to build and maintain a student’s portfolio than it is to simply have a student take a standardized test once and then use that score to describe their academic abilities, so in general schools and governmental entities refer to standardized tests and the “validity” that accompanies them. What frightens me is that a great amount of weight is being placed on that incomplete picture of students’ abilities; people in positions of power are using them to hold teachers accountable for what their students do and don’t know how to do on standardized measures.

The aim of educational accountability is to hold schools directly responsible for the proper education of children. It is supposed to ensure that teachers engage in good practices and that districts provide appropriate services to those in need. These two outcomes are supposed to be demonstrated through standardized test results. My own experiences in a school district where this system was already in place showed me a much different outcome. Teachers did not tailor instruction to include modified, more dynamic methods; they just made lesson plans that said they did. The district provided inadequate out-of-school tutoring services to assist students who had fallen behind; these students were not going to fill the large gaps in their education, but the district could say that services were provided. Schools showed overall educational gains, measured by standardized tests, by changing the focus from actual education to simply preparing for the tests. Focusing on accountability did not lead to change. Instead of drawing students out into actively and critically engaging the world, children like Larry were still beaten down until they withdrew into themselves. Children still got overlooked and left behind, but people and institutions were able to absolve themselves of blame by documenting accommodations, even if they were not practiced. I don’t know how this type of system is going to help all children, and I don’t know how that helps get Larry to come out of his jacket. It makes me feel like joining him.

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